



Sen. Maria Sachs: Florida needs to be doing more in response to Zika virus

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Florida is certainly no stranger when it comes to confronting mosquito-borne diseases, having dealt with numerous outbreaks of illnesses like malaria, encephalitis, chikungunya and dengue fever. However, a new virus, the Zika virus, now stands to rapidly spread throughout our state.

This new affliction is so threatening that Gov. Rick Scott even declared a state of emergency in Broward, Hillsborough, Lee, Miami-Dade, Osceola, Santa Rosa and St. John's counties. If we are not able to slow its spread, it will have the potential to wreak havoc on our population and severely impact our tourism industry.

The Zika virus is a contagious tropical disease that induces mild symptoms such as fever, rash and fatigue;;at the same time, the virus is also closely associated with the rise of a serious birth defect called microcephaly, whereby scores of infected pregnant mothers are giving birth to babies with abnormally small heads and brains.

Many health researchers have also identified the Zika virus as a potential cause of Guillian-Barré syndrome in adults, a rare neurological condition that can result in paralysis.

Florida's first case of the Zika virus, originally contracted overseas, was confirmed just last month.

In early February, there were 16 cases of the Zika virus in Florida that had been reported to our state's health authorities, all of which were contracted abroad.

The Zika virus is primarily transmitted from bites from infected *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes, a species commonly found throughout Florida. The disease can remain viable for a week in blood samples, such that the Zika virus can also be contracted from blood transfusions, sexual

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intercourse and the sharing of drug needles. Taking this into account, our state's warm and humid climate, year-long mosquito presence, abundance of standing water and constant stream of international visitors make Florida a potential "ground zero" for a widespread Zika virus outbreak.

Consequently, there is also a high likelihood that countless individuals from around the world, especially pregnant women, will be advised to avoid coming to Florida for vacation or other purposes in the event of a Zika virus outbreak in our state, which would result in millions of dollars in lost revenue with respect to tourism and travel.

Despite the fact that a state of emergency already exists in several Florida counties and our state is already leading the nation in ramping up mosquito spraying and education programs, we need to be doing much more to prepare for what the Zika virus may bring. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that pregnant women who have recently traveled to areas with a significant prevalence of the Zika virus be screened for the disease, an emergency measure which I strongly feel needs to be implemented in Florida as soon as reasonably possible. A similar screening procedure should also be carried out on other individuals arriving from heavily infected regions.

Last week, I met with Florida Surgeon General Dr. John Armstrong. He assured me that the state had purchased Zika virus test kits from the CDC and that more were available if we needed them.

You can do your part in helping to stem the expected spread of the Zika virus by applying bug spray when going outside in the morning and evening hours and making sure to dump or remove any standing water in and around your property.

Installing screens on windows and making sure all doors and windows remain closed also will keep mosquitoes outside. If you have any window screens with holes in them, you should also take time to patch those up. For women who are pregnant and have recently traveled to areas with Zika virus activity, the Florida Department of Health highly suggests getting an ultrasound and being tested for the virus.

If you have any questions or concerns, you can also contact the Zika Virus Information Hotline at (855) 622-6735. In the meantime, please stay tuned to media sources for news and updates on the Zika virus.

State Sen. Maria L. Sachs, D-Delray Beach, represents District 34.

